

RELIGION

PRE-CHRISTIAN BELIEFS¹

The pre-Christian beliefs of the Yakut were closely associated with their mode of life, which was conditioned by the nature of their habitat. The greater part of the Yakut tribe occupied the Amga-Lena elevated plateau. Their occupations and religion were adapted to their environment. The surface of the plateau represents a complicated system of rivulets and brooks separated from each other by vast forested hills and surrounded by mountain ridges. The Yakut distinguish two kinds of land formation: the *urăr* (rivulet), grass covered lowland, and *alas*, somewhat higher plains surrounded by forests interspersed with lakes.

The abundance of grass, animals, and birds in the woods and of fish in the numerous lakes, influenced Yakut economic activity. They were cattle-breeders, hunters, and fishermen. In the early historic period they had four or five times as many horses as horned cattle; at present the number of horned cattle is several times greater than that of horses. The Yakut concept of their spiritual world was based on their material surroundings. Natural phenomena, water and land, animals and plants, and the fate of men are directed by independent beings called "owners." The Yakut pantheon includes the following supernatural beings:—

- Ajy*, creative beings
- Icci*, masters
- Abasy*, eaters, malevolent beings
- Yör*, man's soul after death

Side by side with them we find the remnants of an earlier conception of the world as being composed of animate beings: *tañara*, sky; *āhā* (grandmother), river; and *uslo*, mountains. We also find *xaya iccila*, the mountain owner, and the germs of more involved ideas: *Ūrūñ Ajy Toyon*, White Creator Lord; *Ulūtuyar Ulū Toyon*, Titular Horrible Lord. Not quite clear and somewhat doubtful appears *Arsan Duolai*, the terrible dweller of the underground world. However, only the *Ajy*, *Icci*, *Yör*, and *Abasy* play a conspicuous rôle in Yakut life.

Where do these beings dwell? The Yakut have a clear idea of the chief and cardinal points (*diāki* or *diākki*) and their intermediates and also of relative heights. The chief cardinal points are: *ilin*, east (literally, the front, front part); *arhā*, west (and at the same time, the back, the back part); *rotu*, north, for which is sometimes substituted the word, *rañas*, the left side; *sohurū*, south, which is occasionally replaced by the

¹This section is based chiefly on V. M. Jonov's article in the *Publications du Musée d'Anthropologie et d'Ethnographie de l'Académie Impériale des Sciences de Petrograd*.

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"The Yacoutes have for the bear a kind of superstitious fear: they believe that in this animal the spirit survives the body. In spite of this, they do not scruple to shoot a bear and to eat its flesh, but it is by observing certain forms which they suppose have the power to turn aside the witchcraft. Imagine some Yacoutes travelling, and in crossing a forest that they should meet a bear. All begin by taking off their caps, lavishing upon him many salutations, and calling him by the name of toione (lord) of worthy old man, of good father, and so on. In the mean time they beseech him, in the most humble terms, to allow them to continue their journey, assuring him, that instead of forming any bad design against his lordship, on the contrary, they entertain the greatest respect for him. But whilst addressing these fine words to the animal, our cunning Yacoutes go forward, choose a tree suitably situated, in order to be safe from behind, and then shoot the animal dead. This first point settled, they make haste to skin it, and having cut it into pieces without breaking the bones, which they put aside (it will soon be seen for what reason), they cook the said pieces. During the preparations, a man of the same party has taken care to knead, with clay lightly moistened, a little statue representing Boënai, the Great Spirit. The meat being cooked, the caldron is raised in addressing a prayer to Boënai and to the spirit of the forest. According to the belief of the Yacoutes, each forest is placed under the direct influence of a spirit. They then sit down round the smoking soup, and each of the guests takes care to pour on the

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fire the first spoonful of gravy. Then the feast begins. While it lasts, the guests often apostrophize the ghost of the bear which they have thus dispatched. 'No,' say they, 'don't believe us capable of having perpetrated such a murder. Among us, poor Yacoutes, the art of making guns and deadly balls is unknown. They are either some Russians or Tougouses who have done the evil deed.' After the repast the bones of the animal are carefully put together, wrapped up with the idol in a piece of birch-tree bark, and then hung up to a tree. 'You see it well,' they go on repeating during the [148] ceremony, 'far from being murderers, it is on the contrary we who gather together here the bones of this bear killed by others!'

" 'The blacksmith and the shaman are from the same nest,' says the Yakut proverb(2)

2. Sieroshevsky, V. L., The Yakuts. St. Petersburg, 1896, p. 631.

The blacksmith has even the greater supernatural powers. 'The first blacksmith, the first shaman, and the first potter were blood brothers. The blacksmith was the oldest, and the shaman the middle. ' Therefore the shaman being younger cannot cause the death of the blacksmith. In every attempt of the shaman 'to eat the blacksmith', the tools of the latter, his tongs, his hammer, and the anvil are transformed into winged creatures, which, flying around, strike and pinch the shaman. When the shaman wishes to thrash the soul (3) of the blacksmith, this soul hides in the kuolgan (the iron plate with seven

3. According to Yastremsky, the Yakut believe that the soul, kut, consists of three elements: buor-kut (earth-soul), iya kut (mother soul), anya kut (father soul). After death the soul undergoes transformations, and the souls of the famous shamans can be transformed seven times. According to Baishev, bour kut remains after the death with the corpse in the grave; saigin kut is transformed into a wandering spirit, yor, and gur kut after death is reincarnated. (Tr.)

or nine holes of different diameters for punching holes in [258] the metals), where the shaman cannot reach him.(1)

1. Kulakovsky, A. E., Materials for the Study of the Beliefs of the Yakuts, Yakutsk, 1923, pp. 67-68.

Moreover small models of the blacksmith's paraphernalia serve as amulets to the shaman." (2)

2. Potanin, G. N., Thunder in the Beliefs and Folklore of the Tribes of Southern Siberia and Northern Mongolia. Journal of Department of Education, January 1882, p. 159.

"According to the ideas of the Dolgans, (3) the shaman cannot swallow the soul of the

3. The Dolgans are nomadic tribes of Yakutized Tungus who wander over the territory of the river Taimir, the upper part of the Piasina and Dudipta Rivers and the Nolir Lakes. (Tr.)

blacksmith because it is preserved in fire, but the blacksmith on the contrary can easily kill the shaman. In order to do this, he must throw his kuolgan under the feet of the shaman leaving the forge, or bury it in the doorway over which the shaman will pass, pronouncing at the same time special incantations. (4) By stepping over it the shaman

4. Yakuts of Viluysk region, author's notes.

leaves his soul in the kuolgan. When the shaman leaves, the blacksmith destroys his soul by heating the kuolgan until it is red hot. A blacksmith can also kill a shaman by playing upon the belief that his spirits are afraid of the sparks from the heated iron. When a shaman leaves the forge, the blacksmith forcibly strikes the heated piece of iron and says: 'Let it pierce his back!' (5) The sparks fall upon the shaman and he soon dies.

5. Kulakovsky, op. cit. p. 68

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Because of this danger the shaman cannot pass without danger between the anvil and the forge during the shamanizing.

According to V. L. Sieroshevsky, (6) in the north shamans refuse to perform the cer-

6. Sieroshevsky, V. L., Twelve Years among the Yakuts. Warsaw, 1900,

emony in a room where there are blacksmith tools. The blacksmith is regarded as having supernatural advantage over the shaman also among the Buriats. The Buriat blacksmith, when he makes the bell pendants, for the horse sticks of the shaman, insists that there should not be less than ninety, but the shaman being afraid of this fatal number tries to persuade the blacksmith to make fewer, otherwise he will soon die. (7)

7. Agatipov and Hangalov, Materials for the Study of Shamanism in Siberia. Izvestia of Russian Geog. Society, Vol. XIV, Nos. 1-2, p. 8."

116, 326, 756, 774

"The forging of the shamanistic pendants is a very serious task not without danger to the blacksmith and requires special preparations. Among the Dolgans it is necessary for two men to work together. This is always done at the end of spring, outside, away from the dwellings, in a place surrounded by a special palisade. One of the blacksmiths stands upon the hide of a wolverine, the other upon a wolf-skin, the bellows man upon the skin of a white deer specially killed for this purpose as it 'governs the spirit of the fire'. If the bellows man does not have this[259] hide, his whole body will be covered with sores. The blacksmith who must make these pendants for the shamans is selected by the shaman's spirit, and cannot refuse or his luck will leave him. The shaman projects his spirit into the blacksmith while he is forging the pendants, so that it is not the blacksmith who makes them but the spirit of the shaman. "

116, 753, 756, 761, 774, 776

The shaman's endeavor is not always successful. He may not succeed in finding out the identity of the spirit who causes the illness, or once that he has managed to, he may not be able to locate him at a given moment, or, at last, the negotiations may have failed to bring about persuasion of the frightful, cruel demon, to appease him, to change his ire into indulgence. Unconditionally helpless is the shaman with pestilence and epidemics (džan). The demon will not cease grasping the soul (kut) of the patient as a prey, takes possession of it, severs it from the body, and flees away with it. The patient's body remains unmoved and stops breathing, and unless the dreadful demon is propitiated before long, the soul will fail to come back to its former abode, the bodily frame will cool down and be subject to decomposition.

18: Priklonski--82

[2]

E-5 (no date) 1891

Yakut

116, 513, 761, 774

Sleep is the image of death. When the body is asleep, the soul has left him without, however, withdrawing too far. The same state may take place in cases of fainting fits, fever, and other diseases in which a man loses his conscience.